

# CHILDLESS COUPLE BECOMES 'MOM', 'DAD' TO 936 KIDS

By RALPH R. GOMPERTZ

The day that Merle and Marion Unger learned that they could never have children of their own, Willow View was born.

With its birth, Merle and Marion Unger, of 5214 Vanderhill rd., became "mom" and "dad" to 936 children who were born on the wrong side of the tracks.

Two years after the Ungers were married, they learned that they could not have any children of their own. This was in 1948 when they were living in Springfield, Mass.

They wanted children more than anything in the world and the following year they adopted Roger, 8, who was 10 days old at the time.

"Let's have a big house and fill it up with kids," Mrs. Unger suggested one day.

Her husband was sympathetic to the idea. There was only one thing wrong—they didn't have any money with which to buy a house.



HAPPY HOME

Mr. and Mrs. Merle Unger and their adopted son, Roger, 8. —Press Photo

### Promises to Find House

"When you come back from your two week's tour of duty with the National Guard, I'll have a house somehow," Mrs. Unger promised.

When he returned, his wife had acquired an almost 200-year-old mansion, complete with three attics, 16 rooms, and 135 acres of land which was not part of the "sale" but lay at their disposal.

"I thought she had flipped," Unger said, recalling his reaction when his wife announced she had obtained a house.

The Ungers credit "Mr. Murphy the real estate agent" with the realization of their dream.

### No Money

"I had approached him about this house," Mrs. Unger stated. "I waited with the \$500 down payment until the very last minute. Then I asked Mr. Murphy: Have you ever taken a chance on a sure thing? I don't have the \$500 but I have to have the house."

"I told him what we wanted it for.

"Mr. Murphy looked at me for a long time and then he said: 'Anyone wanting a house as bad as you must be a good bet.' He gave us six months to pay off and we did."

Willow View became the temporary home for wards

of the state until permanent homes could be found for them.

"We had about 30 children at a time, both boys and girls, anywhere from 2 to 19 years old," Unger stated. "The average age was from 7 to 12."

"We can tell you stories about some wonderful kids and some terrible adults," Mrs. Unger added.

Both look back upon this period which ended in 1953 with fond and heart-breaking memories.

### Strictly GI

"We ran the place Army style—strictly GI," Unger who was with the 692nd Tank Destroyer Battalion, said. "Everyone had responsibilities and privileges. The kids loved it."

Most of the youngsters were from broken homes. Some had no parents, to their knowledge. Others had parents, who didn't bother about them.

### Chip on Their Shoulder

"The biggest problem when they came to us was that they had a chip on their shoulder and were waiting for someone to knock it off," Unger explained. "We didn't knock it off. We just took it down and handed it to them and had them make something of themselves."

It takes a combination of discipline and gentleness to handle youngsters, and the difference between success and failure is a very thin line.

"It was necessary to be firm with the children. Unless they learned to respect themselves they wouldn't respect others," Mrs. Unger explained.

"Kindness, together with firmness, covered a lot of territory," her husband added.

In addition to the fact that they couldn't have any children of their own, the Ungers had another reason for wanting to help these youngsters.

When Mrs. Unger was a child, she was placed in a number of foster homes.

"All the time I thought to myself: 'If I ever have chil-

dren I wouldn't want them to go through what I had to go through."

### A Normal Home

That's why the Ungers were anxious to make their temporary wards as happy as they knew how, giving them as normal a life as possible.

Merle Unger continued to work full-time and even though the state paid them for keeping the youngsters, they often dug into their own pockets in order to give the children a happy home, especially around birthdays and holidays.

The Ungers still hear from some of the youngsters. One, in particular, is their pride and joy.

### 'Wise Guy'

He is 24 years old now. When he came to them he was 13 years old and a real "wise guy" with a chip on his shoulder.

"When he got fresh with me I had to teach him a lesson," Mrs. Unger related. "I had learned Judo while I was in the service and before he knew what had happened, he was on the floor looking up."

From that day on he was her staunchest defender. "You don't get fresh with Mom," he instructed all newcomers.

He has just completed four years in the Navy and is about through with college where he studied engineering. He is engaged to a lovely girl and the two plan to get married shortly.

Unger, who was in show business before the war, following in the foot-steps of his mother, still retains the deep love of people, so characteristic of the true actor, and a particular talent for the comic with its tragic overtones.

His father, who was Jewish, became a Catholic when he married. Unger recalling his happy home life, points to a necklace which he wears, suspended from which is a cross and a star of David.

"Having both bloods in me, I give both of them a plug,"

he smiles. "Of course I give the Catholic religion top billing."

A jet crash, near their home, finally brought the Willow View dream to a close.

While only the pilot was killed, the experience had such an effect on their adopted son, Roger, who witnessed the crash, that it was credited with arresting his growth temporarily.

Giving up Willow View, the Ungers moved to Torrance where he is presently employed at Douglas El Segundo.

"Willow View was a cherished chapter in our lives," both recalled. "We'd do it all over again. We couldn't have had more fun. One thing we have thought about often is that crash. If the plane crash could affect our children the way it did, what of all the children in the war-torn countries of Europe?"

## UJWF DRIVE NEARING \$80,000 MARK

The current United Jewish Welfare Fund campaign is nearing the \$80,000 mark in the southern section to top the total raised for the entire UJWF drive last year, it was reported today by Mrs. Ella Schwartz, chairman.

The present amount includes more than \$61,000 for the regular UJWF campaign and \$17,500 for the special "Rescue" appeal. Total last year in the southern section for both regular and the special appeal was \$77,226.

Total to date for all phases of the county-wide UJWF campaign — Greater Los Angeles area (residential and communities), trades and professions, women's division, division of organizations, youth division, and motion picture-TV-radio—is approximately \$5,500,000.

Funds raised in Centinela Valley-South Bay amount to \$12,500.

Meanwhile, a telephone call-back effort by local volunteers will take place Thursday night, June 13, in the southern division, and Tuesday, June 18, in the southeast division to reach those who have been previously contacted but have not yet made a contribution or pledge.

## Homeowners Blast Tract Development

More than 100 residents of the Palos Verdes Riviera district protested provisions of an 81 lot subdivision at the City Council meeting Tuesday, and the matter was turned back over to the Planning Commission for study.

Eugene Pinski, 5331 Via del Valle, led the protest by demanding Harry Kissel, president of the development firm, to guarantee against drainage damage to existing property and asked that certain portions of the development be restricted to residential use.

Kissel's effort to placate the angry homeowners, all former customers, came to a quibbling end with many accusations exchanged.

The development, scheduled to occupy the area along both sides of Vista Montana south and west of Newton st., would "bottle up the only access road open to residents of the homes higher on the hills," the petitioners declared.

Although the tract map was approved by the Planning commission last week, council members voted unanimously to refer it back to the commission.

## PV Pilot Missing

Civic Air patrol squadrons from Torrance and Santa Barbara joined the Sheriff's Aero Squadron yesterday in a search for a plane overdue at Torrance Airport since Sunday night.

The plane was piloted by Stanwood Wellington, 36, 848 Rincon Lane, Palos Verdes, who had been visiting his aunt in Santa Barbara. The aunt, Ann Mary Barker, said that Wellington took off from there at 10:30 Sunday night to return to Torrance airport.

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